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Vigilance Pays Off in Noxious Weed Fight

Missoula, MT. – The impacts of noxious weeds in western Montana are well known to the people who battle against new weed infestations: impaired wildlife habitat, increased erosion, impacts to hydrologic cycles, less productive farm and ranch land. The specific list of negative impacts is pages long and reflects the ripple effect so often seen in ecosystems where everything is linked, and where the health of one is dependent on the health of another. And one of the hard-learned lessons in the fight against noxious weeds is that the best strategy is to deny them a foothold. Once they are established they are much more difficult to contain and eradicate. The fight becomes longer, more complicated, more expensive.

The Missoula County Weed District has prescribed plans in place to locate and eradicate “new invaders” just for that reason. It paid off in mid-September when Carl Anderson of the Missoula Ranger District was conducting a routine check on the condition of the Fish Creek Road after the Lolo Creek Complex Fire. Anderson noticed a yellow starthistle plant along Highway 12 adjacent to Fish Creek Road. Yellow starthistle is well established in Idaho but so far has not infested Montana. As part of the district’s Early Detection Rapid Response (EDRR) program, Anderson reported it and soon the Missoula County Weed District was notified and they immediately began eradication efforts.

“Employees from both the county and forest were soon on sight to survey portions of Highway 12 and Fish Creek Road to ensure additional plants were not establishing,” said Karen Stockmann, Missoula Ranger District Weed Coordinator. “The individual plant was pulled and the 500 feet either side of the plant’s location was treated with five ounces of Milestone along the highway corridor.”

Stockmann said yellow starthistle is listed as a Priority 1A noxious weed for Montana. This means established populations are not found in the state and management priorities are education, prevention, and eradication (when plants or small populations are found). These priorities are designed to prevent new populations from establishing in Montana and so far it is working, Stockmann said. Since 1958, yellow starthistle has been reported in only eight counties in Montana. These infestations were detected early and immediately eradicated. This recent discovery bumps the number of reported sites to nine.

“This weed is an aggressive invader,” Stockmann said. “It’s prevalent in California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho. California alone has documented the weed invading over 10 million acres.” She said the 0.5 to 2-inch long spines that grow from the bracts on the bright yellow flowers make any infested area inhabitable and undesirable to wildlife. As a rapid colonizer, it germinates quickly under most conditions and seeds can germinate throughout the year and overwinter as seedling.

Stockmann said current trends indicate yellow starthistle will continue to invade Montana. Yellow starthistle is a priority for immediate eradication. The public is asked to contact their county weed coordinator before applying eradication efforts so they can properly identify and map the location of the plant. To locate your county weed coordinator please visit, <http://www.mtweed.org/find-weed-coordinator/>

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